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The Burning of Uncle

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The Burning of Uncle

The banked gravel road sticks out from the flat land like a scratch on a hand.

Three men are trotting towards the road from across the field. They bob up and down and slowly make their way to the road. Like field mice finding refuge in a sage bush, they go to a small opening into the brush and cotton wood trees that line the road.

"Ho, ho, ho, pretty damn cold," says the larger man. The collar of his long wool coat has four holes cut on each side and the sides are tied together by a leather boot lace like the shank of a high top tennis shoe. He wipes the small streams of sweat from his forehead and it glistens. A scar from the side of his lip runs to his nose and causes a break in his mustache. He comes to a stop and waits for the other two men. His name is Skiddo.

"Hey? Hey? How come-come-how-come-we-have to run? You'll freeze out our lungs, Skiddo." This man's name is Bull Cookies. He walks around for a moment and comes to a stop and rubs his hump of a belly. A bath towel serves as a cap and earmuffs. He takes off the towel and wipes off the sweat. Then he re-wraps the towel around his head and smiling he looks up into Skiddo's eyes.

"Skiddo. Cah-zin. Why do you want to run for? We're not going to be late for anything." This man's name is Skin. He stays a few feet from the other two men. He bends over and rubs his knees. A tail from his hand made gopher skin cap snaps down and slaps his eyeglasses. He takes off his glasses and allows the fog to clear from them.

Bull Cookies pats his arms across his own chest and says, "Give him a drink, Skin. He'll warm up-boy."

Skin takes out a fifth from underneath his shirt. There are no numbers, letters, or pictures, on the bottle. He gives it to Skiddo who unscrews the bottle's cap and drinks. The sucking of the liquid causes his cheeks to pinch. The cap bounces on the crusty snow. "But just one little one-hey," says Skin.

"God this one. Getting greedy." Bull Cookies shakes his head. "Is that what they taught you in whiteman's school?"

"No Uncle. They didn't teach me anything," Skin backs away from Bull Cookies and Skiddo. "But I know when I'm cold-hey."

"Never should have sent you off to school. Never should have let you go. Even when that BIA guy threaten to have me thrown in jail." Bull Cookies

turns away from Skin. He takes a long draw from the bottle. The bottle's dark green color is shared by the fluid inside, but when a sloppy drink is taken and a drop escapes the grasp of lips the drink is clear like water.

"You know." Bull Cookies walks over to Skin and throws his arm around Skin's shoulder. "I raised this guy here." He kisses Skin. "Right after his father died. His father-my brother."

"He knows you raised me Uncle." Skin is passed the bottle and takes a drink. He looks at Skiddo and takes another drink.

"Good whiskey." Skiddo is bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet. "Better-n' that shit we had before."

"What do you know about good drinking juices? I bet you haven't even tasted your first woman yet-huh." Bull Cookies releases Skin and laughs at Skiddo. "Give me another shot-nephew." Bull Cookies tilts the bottle back and causes the alcohol inside the bottle to gurgle.

"Holy-ee, Uncle. Not that thirsty. I hope." Skin takes the bottle and drinks. He then looks at Skiddo and passes it to Skiddo. "Here you go Cah-zin."

The sound of the cars on Highway #2 a quarter mile east of them are mingling with the sounds of Skin using a branch to tap on a cottonwood stump. A field mouse watches the three men from a rotted metal bucket. A school bus passes by on the road above them. The bus driver slows the bus down and looks at them. He shakes his head and speeds away and cusses at the three men; the one singing, the one drumming, and the other who is dancing. The bus crawls on the highway that connects Dodson and Oswego, Montana. A farm house a mile south of them comes to life with lights. A cloud hangs over the chimney stack. An owl looks down on the men from atop a cottonwood. The owl raises its wings and hops into the air and slowly glides farther down the road. The three men stand a few feet from each other and become the points of a triangle. They pass the bottle. When the bottle is nearly empty the triangle is broken up. Bull Cookies finds a small stump and sits.

"Hey-don't do that." Skiddo is talking to himself and rocks backward on his heels and doesn't look at anyone. He leans forward into the cold. "Cookie. Bull Cookie. Bull-fuck-Cookies. God damn Bull fuck Cookies."

"What?" Bull Cookies swirls on the stump.

"I'm cold." Skiddo smiles.

"Hey-yeah." Skin agrees and tries to run in place. His ankles get snared by roots and branches of the brush.

"Drink more whiskey, got-damn it. Or-or go home. I think that's what I'm trying to do." Bull Cookies bounces on the stump. "Go home and hide that

bottle. They aren't going to catch me, got-damn it."

"Let's go home then." And Skin tightens his grip on the bottle's neck and takes a few steps forward.

"You gonna climb that bank, Skin?" Skiddo looks at Skin and points to the steep gravel bank.

"I thought that guy was bad," Bull Cookies points to Skiddo, "But this guy is worse." Bull Cookies tries to focus on Skiddo. "Go my son-go and get an education-go my son-go and climb a ladder."

"Stop-stop singing that goddamn Mormon song. You goddamn Mormon." Skiddo takes a step towards Bull Cookies. Bull Cookies pinches his nose and blows snot out that leaves a trail on his face. He looks at Skiddo and smiles big.

"Hey-hey-look at my rabbit nose-oh-I mean scar," says Bull Cookies. He uses his hand to wipe off the snot and cleans the hand in the two week old snow and dries the hand on a pants leg.

"Goddamn old man. That's disgust-that disgust-its sick-hey." Skiddo charges forward and comes to a sharp halt in front of Bull Cookies. He nearly knocks Bull Cookies over the stump.

"Hey watch it." Bull Cookies leans his head below Skiddo's belly button and clutches Skiddo's hips on the side. Bull Cookies digs his feet into the snow as he tries to steady himself and Skiddo.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Uncle." Skiddo leans over Bull Cookies shoulders. He begins to cry. "Please don't be mad at me, Uncle. I'm sorry. You've always treated me good."

"All right, Skiddo. Now let go of me got-damn it." Bull Cookies pushes Skiddo, but can't get him off. "All of a sudden I'm everyone's got-damn Uncle."

"Poor Uncle." Skiddo cries harder and claws deeper into Bull Cookies. "He lost his wife."

"Where? Where did you lose her?" Now Skin begins to cry. "I'll go and find her for you, Uncle."

"Stop your crying. Both of you. She's dead. I don't want to talk about it," says Bull Cookies.

Skiddo releases Bull Cookies and steps back. Bull Cookies groans and falls over and passes out.

"He's dead!" Skiddo jumps up and throws both of his arms into the air.

"No! Really?" Skin walks over to Bull Cookies' body. He reaches out with his foot and taps Bull Cookies in the ribs. Bull Cookies moans. "See. He's not dead."

"Oh. I thought he was. Give me a drink," says Skiddo and takes a drink.

"God. I'm cold." Skin runs in place and falls over.

"Hey. Cuzin. Let's build a fire." Skiddo puts the bottle into his coat and goes over to Skin. Skin is trying to get to his feet and reaches out to Bull Cookies and uses Bull Cookies' body to get up. "Huh-you want to build a fire?"

"No," says Skin.

"Skiddo picks up Skin. "Come on. Let's build one."

"No." Skin nearly falls down again.

"Yeah. If we don't, Uncle will freeze. We can use some of these dead branches and I got that paper sack from the bottle," says Skiddo.

"Pull off the dead branches." A small stream of saliva comes to its end on Skin's chin.

Skin and Skiddo gather branches, a few broken fence posts, paper bags, and young dead trees. A cock pheasant watches the passing men and is ready for flight. Skin comes too close to the cock and it takes flight from its cover in the brush. Skin runs back to Skiddo. The field mouse dashes from out of the bucket, and from the sky a dark shadow swoops down and scoops up the field mouse. They build a small pile near Bull Cookies. The lights of the farm house are brighter, Highway #2 is silent, the pile has grown, and Bull Cookies has disappeared.

"There we go, Skin. Get ready-hey. This is going to be a big fire. It'll singe your hairs and you'll really be an Indian like me." Skiddo takes out a book of matches from his shirt pocket. He gets closer to some paper and and small twigs, and he strikes the match. The sulphur makes him cough and the flame from the match dies out.

"Hurry up Skiddo-hey, hurry. I'm freezing."

Skiddo's second try is successful. The flame brings life to the paper, to the twigs, and to a piece of cloth.

"Hey." Skin moves closer to the fire.

"What?" Skiddo slowly straightens his body and shrugs to bring life into his back muscles.

"Where's Uncle?"

"He must've gone home. You know how old people are. Why are you worried about it?"

"I didn't see him leave."

"Shit Skin. He probably got mad and left."

"Yeah."

"I bet he's home right now and passed out by the stove."

"Uh-huh."

"At least we'll be warm and we have the bottle." Skiddo takes the bottle out from his pocket and takes a drink. He gives the bottle to Skin.

"Yeah, but I didn't see him leave is all."